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ABSTRACT

With the instructor switching positions, alternately assuming the role of questioner and answerer, this paper explores the applicability of circular questioning to the types of interactions in which faculty members engage on a regular basis, such as teaching. Focusing on responses to various questions, the paper speculates that for students to see the element of choice in their habitual responses to issues that are brought up in the intercultural communication course, circular questioning could be instrumental in helping them understand their position in the system (often, students place themselves on the "receiver" end of communication and expect the instructor to "provide" the knowledge for which they have paid). Circular questioning can help to undermine these presumptions and is often most effective in the intercultural communication classroom in developing new possibilities for those students most resistant to change. These students may be unaware that their ways of communicating are one among many and may not be the most effective for every situation. To ensure the circularity of the classroom discussion, each comment made by the instructor can be linked to the last comment made by the student, by using the same terms that students use to explore the grammar or usage of terms in the Wittgensteinian sense. The paper concludes by considering the level of difficulty in switching from rhetorical to circular questions in the classroom. (TB)

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"What If We Asked Circular Questions Instead of 'Rhetorical Questions'?: Possibilities for the Classroom and Daily Interactions."

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presented to the panel "New Directions in Circular Questioning: Therapy and Beyond." Speech Communication Association Annual Meeting, San Antonio, Texas, Nov. 18, 1995.

I would like take the question of the title of this presentation as the departure point for my argument. As instructors, partners, parents, colleagues, social beings, we engage in conversations where we use questions for a variety of purposes. We request information, we indicate we have a lot to say about something, we pretend we don't know the answer but we are corroborating whether our interlocutor (often a student) can guess our thoughts. Different ways of talking create different realities.

These are of course not the only ways and reasons why we ask questions. In the classroom, the Socratic method, and the rhetorical strategy of asking questions to elicit a specific response is most common. We have all been trained and are accomplices in maintaining it as the standard method for teaching.

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The objective of this presentation is two-fold: the primary purpose is to explore the applicability of circular questioning to the types of interaction in which faculty members engage on a regular basis, such as teaching.

Also discussed in this presentation will be the contexts for conducting circular questioning, including the positions of the persons in the system and the relationship to one another. Lastly, this presentation will caution against quasi-circular questioning, where the questions seem circular, but the outcome ends up being other than joining with the system to effect change.

The secondary purpose is perhaps guided by selfish reasons for if, as Wittgenstein said, "learning is a doing," I have attempted to learn about the method and about practicing the method itself by making a presentation that contemplates its applications in the classroom.

As I mentioned before, the title of this presentation is useful because I am treating it as a circular and not a rhetorical question. When I asked it, I did not know THE answer to it, because the purpose was to explore and hypothesize about possibilities for action in my teaching.

In the course of preparing to teach an Intercultural Communication lecture, I switch person positions and treat myself as questioner and questioned, asking myself:

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"WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF I WERE TO STOP SEEING MYSELF IN THE FIRST PERSON POSITION OF 'I,' THE POSITION OF INSTRUCTOR ADDRESSING A COLLECTIVITY OF SECOND-PERSON STUDENTS AND SHIFT INSTEAD TO A COLLECTIVE THIRD PERSON 'WE'?" Questions such as this present many possibilities for joint action, especially in setting where the topic can become volatile as in an intercultural communication class. As I shift positions and attempt to join the system of knowledge that the intercultural communication classroom setting allows, my efforts are met with slight resistance by some students who are unaccustomed to play roles other than those assigned to them by convention. On occasion instructors may ask of students that which they themselves ignore, but students realize this is an exception and are much more comfortable when the instructor enacts his/her assigned role: to provide information which the students lack.

HOW CAN STUDENTS ALSO LEARN TO CHANGE PERSON POSITION AND TO SEE THEIR ACTIONS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE ISSUES DISCUSSED IN CLASS? In order for students to see the element of choice in their habitual responses to issues that are brought up in the intercultural communication course, such as diversity and multiculturalism, circular questioning could be instrumental in helping them understand their position in the system, and how they have come to perceive such responses as forced upon them by others.

WHAT MUST HAPPEN FIRST IN ORDER FOR STUDENTS TO ACCEPT MY CHANGE OF POSITION? In the classroom, not unlike many instances of therapy, students place themselves on the "receiver" end of communication and expect the instructor to "provide" the knowledge for which they've paid handsomely. While ultimately I may not be able to reject this role totally, I learned from my students that I should make such person-position shifts public and explain to them the purpose for that shift. Although students who rejected my shift in person-position were the exception, their justification was that I was there to teach them, and they had not paid tuition so that I could learn at their expense.

WHAT KINDS OF ANTECEDENTS DO STUDENTS NEED TO SEE THAT LEARNING ABOUT OTHER CULTURES INVOLVES LEARNING ABOUT ONE'S OWN? Students can practice cosmopolitan communication by exploring their basic assumptions about values from the statements they make, as they come to understand the basic assumptions about the values of their classmates. The technique would then be effective in helping the participants to engage in what Freeman, Littlejohn and Pearce (1992) call "constructive reflection" by helping them create categories that are then used to compare their previously thought incommensurate positions. Shifting the goals from persuasion and assimilation of the other into one's own value system, students can be guided to ask questions that explore the commonalities among various value systems; to switch from "us vs. them" to "one and all."

WHICH STUDENTS WOULD BENEFIT MOSTLY FROM IMPLEMENTING CIRCULAR QUESTIONING AS A TEACHING STRATEGY? The method would be most effective in helping to develop new possibilities for those in the intercultural communication classroom who are most resistant to change. One challenge here is that they may be minimally or satisfactorily competent in their communication, as Linda Harris suggests (1979), failing to recognize and/or accept that their ways of communicating are one among many and that these may not be the most effective for every situation.

HOW WOULD THIS BE MORE HELPFUL THAN ASKING RHETORICAL QUESTIONS? The instructor as well as the students would ask circular questions in order to uncover assumptions and help each other conceptualize the issues and their answers to them on a new level, which would enable them to compare their own stand with that of their classmates'. More than giving information about different cultures, the instructor of the intercultural communication course using Circular Questioning, could join students in a creation of categories by which they could compare their values, critically assess intercultural communication as socially constructed, and understand and accept the allowances and constraints of those values as well as the values of other students, so as to achieve coordinated meaning.

WHO ELSE WOULD BENEFIT FROM USING THE CIRCULAR QUESTIONING IN THE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COURSE? As I, the instructor, join the system of knowledge as participant, I am able to ask "what is it that I am doing here and now?" and "what should I do now?" and realize that my choices are not made freely: they are attached to definitions of self, my definitions of the students as "other," my relationship with them, the current situation, and those goals which I hope to accomplish. As I shift to the position of observer, I can ask of our system of knowledge: "What are we making here? how? how does it fit to other situations and activities?" This allows me to understand the teaching experience as a series of joint actions which obey certain rules, ignore some and create others. (Pearce, 1994).

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF STUDENTS LEARN TO USE AND ACCEPT THE CIRCULAR QUESTIONING METHOD AS A TOOL FOR LEARNING ABOUT INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION? Some desired outcomes of using the Circular Questioning method in the intercultural communication classroom would be to encourage students to consider, develop and experiment with different ways of communicating; to understand that their own method as a case among cases and not as common sense; to help students see connections in the system which are somehow blocked, and to understand their own contradictions by placing them in the middle of a paradoxical situation; and to help them learn how to do bricolage and engage in what Pearce calls cosmopolitan communication, which is learning how to develop their own strategies for understanding their own communicative practices and those of others of different cultures. (Pearce, 1989).

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF THESE GOALS WERE NOT ACHIEVED? Circular Questioning as a teaching strategy for the intercultural communication class is not, as Vernon Cronen has endlessly stressed, "a cookie-cutter" approach that would be fitting for all -situations. The technique cannot be seen as a neutral approach, without assumptions for, as you have already heard from my colleagues, it has plenty. What the technique can do is take some of those assumptions to approach controversial issues in the intercultural communication classroom to a separate level, not value-free, but new and accessible.

HOW CAN WE KNOW THAT THE TECHNIQUE IS CIRCULAR AND NOT RHETORICAL? The instructor could ensure the circularity of the conversation, where each comment made by the instructor is linked to the last comment made by a student, using the same terms that students use in order to explore the "grammar" or usage of the terms in a Wittgensteinian sense. Secondly, it is possible to punctuate action as sequential, with antecedents and consequents by asking "time" questions such as "When did you first get the idea that some groups of people were getting special deals based on their ethnic background?" or "How long have you known about human and civil rights abuses?" This type of questions would lead instructors to address connections among students as part of social systems. The "gossiping in the presence of others" feature of Circular Questioning that the Milan Team developed can be achieved by asking students who are members of protected groups questions such as "What do you think makes European-American students so angry about Affirmative Action and minority scholarships?" and to the European-American students ask "Who would question the abilities of protected groups students to get admitted on their own merits?" Lastly, students could be invited and encouraged to hypothesize and frame statements differently - where questions like "Suppose that all scholarship money dried up an no one except the very rich could attend college, how would things be different? Who would be most affected by it? How would things be different if everyone got to attend college, regardless of merit or of financial ability? Who would dis/like the new situation?" place students in the position to wonder about other possibilities by asking "what if..."

WOULD THERE BE ANY OTHER SITUATIONS WHERE THE QUESTIONS SEEM TO BE CIRCULAR BUT IN FACT DO NOT ACHIEVE CIRCULARITY? If the questions do not identify and develop levels of context, do not help conversants in the development of reframing of stories, and do not identify relationships among stories told by students, then they will not lead to a change in the grammar of meaning and action and will continue to perpetuate what Pearce calls "institutional amnesia." By not challenging the coherence of stories, the instructor could not introduce paradoxes, and would be unable point out internal contradictions so as to recuperate and privilege stories that have been subverted.

WHEN WOULD QUESTIONS DEFINITELY NOT BE CIRCULAR? If the questioner (instructor or fellow student) does not start from a position of "taking the objects of the social world" such as ethnic differences, "as real and asking what can we know about them" as Pearce suggests (1994b) without a concern for what causes them, what are their effects, what correlates with them, etc., the questions asked cannot lead to circularity. One can also miss the circularity of the system of knowledge by questioning from a lack of awareness of one's own position within the system.

HOW DIFFICULT WOULD IT BE TO SHIFT FROM RHETORICAL TO CIRCULAR QUESTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM? Circular Questioning is not just another method of doing therapy or consulting or teaching, or challenging the coherence of a system.

To be able to engage in this type of conversation requires a firm conviction that the social world is made in conversation, and that instructors have a de facto position of power which can be used to create new conversations with students. One can learn to engage in circular questioning by watching others practice the technique, and by choosing to ask circular questions. The major difficulty I have encountered is to break away from my own habitual responses, from the "received" view of communication to a socially constructed one, whereby I do not "give" answers or knowledge to my students, but I ask questions so that they create their own answers and their own knowledge. Different ways of talking create different realities, but with Circular Questioning, the possibilities for creating realities that improve human life are within the system. It doesn't hurt to be serendipitous, for the answers and questions are within our reach, the difference is how we reach out for them.

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